Glitch
Play
Bee Nix

Glitch Play

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Interactive Design and Game Development Department in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Interactive Design and Game Development at Savannah College of Art and Design

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Abstract

Interacting with glitches is an act of play— a voluntary, creative interaction that reshapes how digital systems are perceived, navigated, and repurposed. To explore glitches as non-destructive disruptions challenges systemic expectations and reveals new opportunities for interpretation and engagement. Approaching meaning through a semiotic lens, this thesis argues that both play and glitches thrive in the tension between structure and improvisation. By reframing glitches as expressive thresholds of agency rather than mere errors, it critiques the influence of rigid cybernetic ideals and emphasizes how players reinterpret and transform their relationships with digital systems, particularly in video games. Through case studies on speedrunning, machinima, and the curated exhibition *Glitch'N'Games*, play is demonstrated not as peripheral to digital culture— it is a vital mode of interaction and transformation.

A willingness to roll the dice is a call to play,
and with each roll, a chance to redefine the game.

Introduction

Engaging with glitches is an essential part of interacting with digital systems, it is an act of play: a voluntary, deliberate, and self-motivated engagement that fuels creativity, exploration, and transformation. Glitches, as defined here, are moments when systems behave in ways that break from expected patterns, disruptions that make visible the underlying structures, assumptions, and constraints of digital environments. These disruptions are not inherently meaningful on their own, but become significant through playful interaction: when they are perceived, interpreted, and repurposed.

Figure 1. *The semiological scheme of myth in Barthes's Mythologies*. Reprinted from D. Monticelli (2016).

Approached from a semiotic perspective, meaning is understood not as something fixed or inherent in objects, but as actively constructed through signs, symbols, and their contextual relationships. French theorist Roland Barthes, whose work in structuralism and myth exposed how cultural narratives mask contingent systems as natural, described myth as a second-order

semiotic system: it takes an already-formed sign (the union of signifier and signified) and turns it into a new signifier within a broader ideological framework. Thus myth repurposes meaning to serve ideology, transforming history into nature, rendering artificial structures self-evident (Barthes, 1957). This process is illustrated in Barthes's semiological scheme of myth (see Figure 1). By adopting this perspective, we see that play and glitch intervene in these layers of signification: not only do they destabilize the appearance of naturalized systems, but they also open up space for reinterpretation. Both operate as symbolic and material forces, illuminating clarity precisely because they occupy a paradoxical space between structure and disruption.

In semiotic terms, symbolic signs rest on learned cultural associations, for example, the word person bears no inherent resemblance to a human body but stands in for it through shared linguistic convention. Iconic signs, by contrast, resemble what they represent: a painted portrait works because visual similarity supports recognition. Indexical signs hinge on physical connection: a photograph of a person, created by light reflecting off their body, captures an indexical trace of their presence. Yet even the indexical trace isn't immune to mediation. As Umberto Eco argues in *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), recognizing an indexical sign depends on culturally learned cues which turn ostensibly physical traces into semiotic functions shaped by interpretation. There is no "outside" to the system of meaning-making; all signs, even those claiming a direct link, are subject to symbolic mediation (Baudrillard, 1994).

It is in the symbolic register of signification, where meaning is actively produced rather than merely identified, that play and glitch most deeply engage. By disrupting an indexical trace's apparent closure, glitches expose its symbolic construction; in navigating that disruption, play animates new circuits of meaning.

Play isn't just entertainment; it's an intentional, self-directed mode of engagement that tests and remakes the boundaries of systems, conventions, and meaning. Though it always operates within formal rules or material constraints,

it opens space for surprise, reconfiguration, and emergent possibilities. Whether structured or spontaneous, play enacts meaning through active participation rather than passive reception. Crucially, it ruptures the stable link between signifier and signified, shattering fixed interpretations and inviting symbolic subversion and new configurations of meaning.

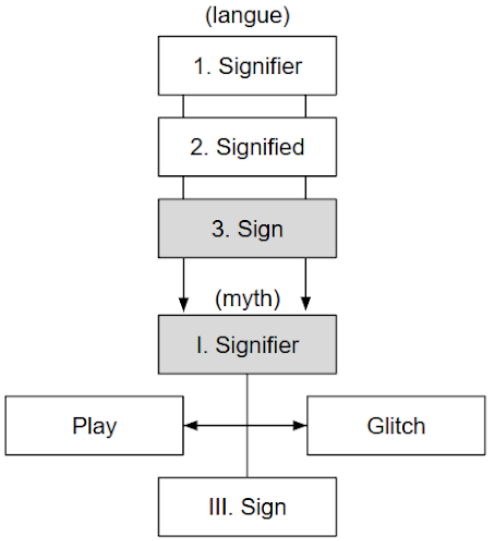

Figure 2. *The semiological scheme of myth with added placement of play and glitch*. Adapted from R. Barthes (1957/1972), *Mythologies*.

Figure 2 intervenes in Barthes's semiological model by positioning play and glitch as active semiotic forces that delay mythic closure. Instead of arriving from the outside, they work from within signification, reframing and subverting the way signs are folded into dominant ideological narratives. This shift moves our focus off the myth's end-point and onto the ongoing process that keeps meaning open, contingent, and play-ready.

It is in these moments of oscillation between order and disruption that glitches, with their cracks and distortions, both unsettle and captivate, upending our usual assumptions of digital media as seamless, stable, and inherently coherent. We often

treat digital systems as though they possess an internal logic or order that is complete and self-contained (free of ambiguity, miscommunication, or error) when in fact that coherence is imposed, maintained, and always vulnerable to rupture. American media theorist Alexander R. Galloway has argued that this staged coherence is encoded in protocol: sets of rules that govern behavior while concealing the underlying complexity of technical processes. By revealing how control operates not only through code but also via interface, Galloway shows that systems naturalize specific ways of interacting while rendering others invisible, demonstrating that systems themselves function as living myths. These rules produce an illusion of control and legibility, even as they mask the contingency and fragility of the system itself (Galloway, 2006).

Taken together, Barthes and Galloway show that glitches aren't mere malfunctions but the very seams where the myth of technological coherence can be punctured, that is, if we choose to explore the tear rather than stitch it shut. Meaning and agency do not emerge from rupture without being acted upon, but from the decision to stay with instability, to resist the impulse to dismiss or repair, and to navigate the opening it offers for reinterpretation.

Whether we encounter pixelated streaming errors or sudden bursts of noise on a music track, glitches (interruptions that shatter the seamless flow we expect of digital media) aren't mere technical failures but sites of creative potential. We can distinguish expressive glitches, which are non-destructive breaks that leave a system operable and invite playful exploration, from destructive glitches, which undermine core components or rules and halt interaction altogether. Critical engagement depends on that system remaining navigable: expressive glitches hover within an "expressive threshold," oscillating between fulfilling expectations and generating surprises, and thus reveal how play itself is shaped by the tension between structured order and spontaneous improvisation.

Building on the expressive/destructive distinction, three principles explain how glitches become sites of creative play:

1. **Perception.** A glitch only "speaks" when someone notices, frames, and inhabits its rupture; no act of disruption generates meaning on its own.

2. **Opportunity.** As speedrunning and machinima demonstrate, glitches serve as pivot points that let players reroute and reconfigure systems not built for flexibility.

3. **Agency.** Players must see themselves as agents of play, willing to stay with instability and improvise new paths instead of simply restoring order.

Together, these principles recast a glitch not as an end point but as an unstable threshold, an opening where meaning, agency, and transformation emerge through engaged play.

The interplay between glitches and play reshapes our relationship with technology, showing that our experiences are not bound solely by design but shaped through creative negotiation. This dynamic was made tangible in *Glitch'N'Games*, a two-day exhibition curated to explore how glitch and play co-construct one another through interactive disruption. In BPMC's circuit-bent PlayStation 2 installation, for example, participants manipulated an array of physical switches and knobs to electrically destabilize *Dance Dance Revolution*'s live camera feed, transforming a tightly scripted rhythm game into an open-ended audiovisual playground. A system once structured around predictable input and feedback instead became a site of playful improvisation and systemic defamiliarization.

Nick Briz's *Tactical Misuse* (a segment of his ongoing work on glitch and digital infrastructure featured in *Glitch'N'Games*) extends this penchant for disruption into our everyday interfaces. In this installation, Briz distributed floppy disks containing lightweight scripts and step-by-step guides that allowed visitors to tactically alter browser behavior, disrupting platform norms, frustrating algorithmic tracking, and revealing the plasticity of supposedly stable interfaces. These scripts

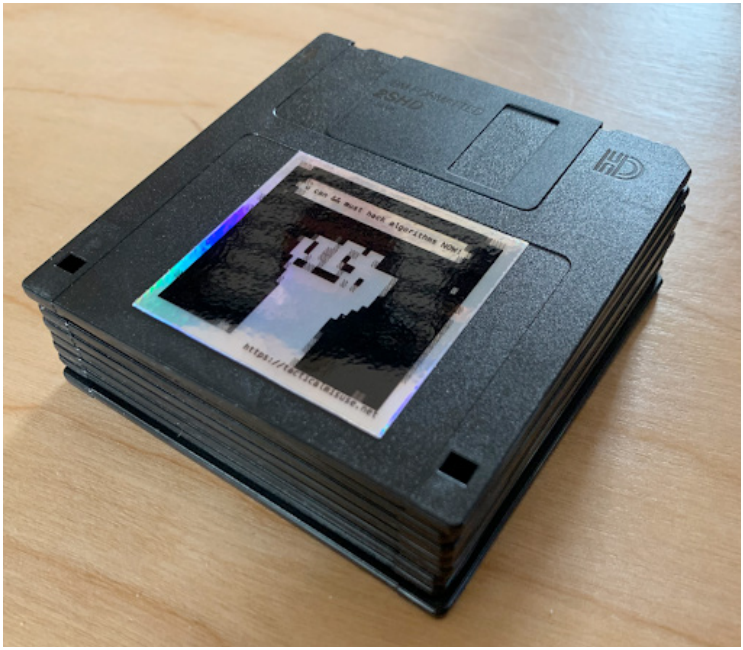

Figure 3. *Nick Briz's Tactical Misuse floppy discs*. Photograph by N. Briz (2024).

remain freely available at tacticalmisuse.net, continuing Briz's ethos of accessible intervention. Rather than accepting familiar infrastructures as neutral or inevitable, *Tactical Misuse* invited users to creatively intervene, misbehave, and reframe their relationships with digital platforms. The project reinforced that system structures are never fixed, but contingent, contestable, and open to reinterpretation by means of playful interaction.

To more fully understand how glitch play resists the structural assumptions of digital systems, we must look to the intellectual climate from which those systems were created. Developed in the mid-20th century, information theory and cybernetics shaped not only the architecture of digital technologies, but also broader cultural understandings of communication, interaction, and disruption. Their logic of efficiency, predictability, and control permeated early video games, from *Nim* on the EDSAC (1951) and *Tennis for Two* on an oscilloscope (1958) to *Spacewar!* on the PDP-1 (1962)

and *Pong*'s binary back-and-forth (1972). These pioneers treated play as a closed, self-regulating system where every input, output, and state was precisely defined. Long before the emergence of ludology (the study of games as rule-based systems) play was recast not as open-ended exploration but as deterministic activity within meticulously maintained boundaries—exactly the structures that glitches expose.

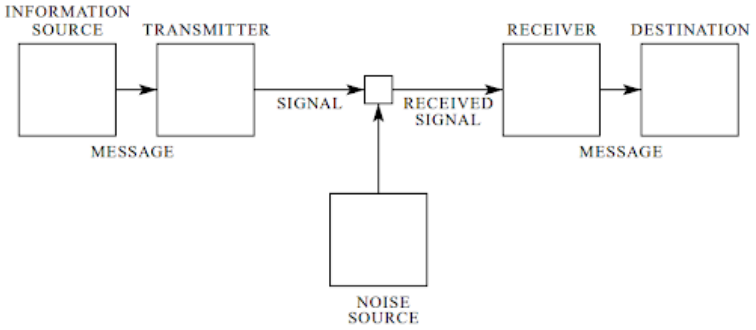

Figure 4. *Schematic of a general communication system*. From C. E. Shannon (1948).

These shifts in framing play and communication as closed, self-regulating processes reflect deeper epistemological changes. Information theory (formulated at Bell Labs by American mathematician-engineer Claude E. Shannon and later popularized through his collaboration with Warren Weaver, an American science administrator at the Rockefeller Foundation) redefined communication as the faithful transmission of discrete signals through noisy channels, privileging clarity and efficiency (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Yet this model (Figure 4) carried assumptions that foreshadow later tensions around glitch: that "information" can be cleanly abstracted from noise, that ambiguity is merely distortion, and that principles devised for electrical signals transfer intact to complex, interpretive systems such as language.

Just before Shannon and Weaver published their model, American mathematician-philosopher Norbert Wiener, along with his collaborators, laid the foundations of cybernetics (Wiener, 1948). In Wiener's view, systems are self-regulating entities that maintain equilibrium through feedback mechanisms, using a system's outputs to adjust its future behavior and reinforcing ideals of stability, predictability, and control.

Materializing in the wake of World War II, Wiener's cybernetics embodied a broader postwar fascination with control, prediction, and automated stability as a direct response to the chaos of global conflict and rapid technological escalation (Galison, 1994; Pickering, 2010; Hayles, 1999). Likewise, both the Shannon–Weaver communication model and Wiener's feedback framework cast disruptions as errors—deviations to be corrected in order to maintain systemic order.

However, even as cybernetics privileged stability and self-correction, the phenomenon of play (emergent, improvisational, and responsive) suggested a different relationship to disruption. Rather than framing deviation as mere error, play engages uncertainty as a generative space, offering an early counterpoint to the cybernetic ideal of systemic closure. Though these frameworks did not emerge in a vacuum, drawing in part on earlier industrial optimization models such as Taylor's scientific management (Taylor, 1911), they laid a powerful foundation that continues to shape how digital systems are built and imagined today (Crawford, 2021). This systemic view would later influence not only technical infrastructure but also the theoretical understanding of games, spurring the creation of ludology as a distinct discipline devoted to studying games as rule-based systems of interaction rather than solely narrative experiences.

Digital systems are not rigid scripts but dynamic, interpretive environments, spaces shaped through feedback, interaction, and contingency. American game designers and theorists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, in their foundational text *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004), build upon this systems-oriented view. They emphasize that "meaningful play" arises when the relationship between player

action and system outcome is both discernible and integrated into the broader context of the game (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 34). In their framing, rules are not rigid constraints but flexible scaffolding, frameworks that allow for emergence, the unpredictable behaviors and experiences that arise through interaction. This understanding is part of the broader systems-oriented perspective already traced here, in which emergence names the dynamic unfolding of meaning and behavior within contingent, responsive environments. Emergence includes not only mastery and success, but also experimentation, failure, and the improvisational navigation of disruption. This perspective aligns closely with glitch-based play, where instability becomes a medium for expression, critique, and reinterpretation.

Across both information theory and cybernetics, disruption was framed not as a potential site of meaning, but as an error to be suppressed. Recognizing this historical framing clarifies why play (particularly glitch-based play) becomes so essential: it contests the assumption that systems must remain seamless, predictable, and closed.

Although Shannon and Weaver's model was not directly derived from cybernetic theory, it emerged from the same postwar intellectual climate, marked by Cold War anxieties, military-industrial funding, and a drive toward control, precision, and automation, and shares cybernetics' emphasis on feedback, regulation, and information flow (Galison, 1994; Pickering, 2010). Over time, cybernetics has evolved from a specialized scientific field into a dominant global paradigm, one that now informs how systems are conceptualized across disciplines including biology, economics, psychology, and artificial intelligence. It has become a powerful epistemological framework through which behavior, adaptation, and complexity are modeled and managed.

Yet these industrial and communicative logics carry real consequences for how we experience and intervene in digital systems. As American communication historian James W. Carey (1989) argues, "the transmission model has deeply shaped American cultural attitudes," centering

communication on efficiency and control while sidelining ambiguity, misinterpretation, and mutual understanding. This rationalization, which mirrors broader industrial processes of standardization and control, effectively erases human agency and labor, reducing interaction to mechanical transmission. Glitch-based play interrupts such erasure by exposing the constructedness of systems and reasserting the presence of interpretation, uncertainty, and negotiation that industrial logics attempt to neutralize.

Both information theory and cybernetics contributed to a broader cultural logic that framed communication as a problem of signal fidelity—where deviation was noise, and noise was a threat to be suppressed (Peters, 1999; Hayles, 1999). This emphasis on cleanliness and control laid the groundwork for a transmission-focused approach to meaning.

Though even as scholars pointed out its limits, the Shannon–Weaver model exerted outsized influence on emerging communication theory. While many have since critiqued its reductive linearity, including its failure to account for context, feedback, or the interpretive complexity of meaning-making (Carey, 1989; Fiske, 1990), it nonetheless helped institutionalize assumptions about both machine operation and human interaction. By standardizing communication as measurable transmission rather than dynamic exchange, the model framed interfaces, protocols, and user experiences as efficient conduits, privileging stability, clarity, and predictability at the expense of ambiguity, disruption, and interpretive play.

American literary critic and cultural theorist N. Katherine Hayles (1999) has drawn attention to how such frameworks reinforce a disembodied conception of information, noting that "the erasure of embodiment is a feature of cybernetic discourse that links it to disembodied information." Building on this critique, Cuban-American media theorist and artist Michael Betancourt has been instrumental in developing a conceptual vocabulary for critically engaging systemic instability. He describes this illusion as the "aura of information," the idea that information exists independently of the bodies, contexts, and

material conditions that produce and interpret it. Within this logic, information is imagined as pure signal: abstract, neutral, and universal. Information theory and cybernetics not only shaped technological infrastructures but also helped construct a wider ideological narrative that conceals contingency beneath the appearance of natural law. In Barthes's terms, this is the work of myth, transforming historically contingent models into self-evident truths. It is one thing to recognize and critique these frameworks as limited; it is another to live within systems that still carry their logics as silent defaults.

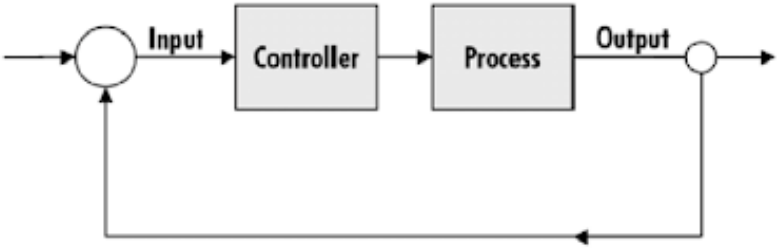

Figure 5. *A simple feedback system*. From R. Swan (2008).

In summation, just before the Shannon–Weaver model was introduced, Norbert Wiener laid the foundations for cybernetics, the field that defined and conceptualized systems as self-regulating entities capable of maintaining equilibrium through feedback: mechanisms that use a system's outputs to adjust its future behavior (Figure 5). Emerging in the wake of World War II, Wiener's work reflected a broader postwar fascination with control, prediction, and automated stability, a response to the chaos and uncertainty of global conflict and technological escalation (Galison, 1994; Pickering, 2010; Hayles, 1999). In both the Shannon–Weaver model of communication and Wiener's cybernetic framework, disruptions were framed as deviations from expected outcomes—errors to be corrected in order to preserve systemic order.

When we shift our approach (treating glitches as catalysts rather than nuisances) these so-called "errors" transform into openings for creativity, exploration, and even subversion. They draw attention to a persistent tension in digital systems: between the drive to maintain order and the unpredictable outcomes that arise when that order is disrupted. While early cybernetic thinking sought to suppress noise and restore stability, later rereadings (especially through the lens of second-order cybernetics and critical media theory) expose a more generative potential within these frameworks: that deviation might not simply threaten a system, but could catalyze novel and unforeseen outcomes. British sociologist Andrew Pickering (2010) notes, the "dance of agency" between systems and disturbances reveals that "the world is continually doing things that are not in our scripts," and it is precisely through these unscripted disruptions that new patterns, meanings, and adaptations emerge (p. 21).

This possibility that breakdown produces novelty rather than collapse anticipates what later theorists would describe as *emergence*: the idea that complex, meaningful patterns may arise from simple rules and recursive interactions. Glitches exemplify this dynamic: they do not merely break a system but reveal how its behavior can be reshaped, and how transformation emerges, through engagement. And just as systems are designed to appear seamless, users are expected to navigate them accordingly: efficiently, predictably, and within intended parameters. By embracing glitches not as failures but as expressive openings, we resist these constraints, affirming instead the evolving, participatory, and often improvisational nature of digital play.

Glitch As Critical Intervention

Figure 6. *Screenshot from the video Digital TV Dinner. From J. F. Fenton* (1978).

Digital TV Dinner, created in 1978 by American programmer and video artist Jamie Fenton (Fig. 6), offers a foundational example of the creative and critical potentials of glitch-based engagement. Rather than treating disruption as failure, Fenton approached systemic instability as a material to work with—a philosophy that sits at the heart of this inquiry. Fenton, who had worked directly on the development team for the Bally Astrocade—an early home video game console notable for its built-in BASIC programming environment—was intimately familiar with the system's architecture. The Astrocade's design lacked many of the

safeguards that would later become standard: cartridges could be removed during operation without resistance, and its hardware tolerated spontaneous interference. This openness did not merely allow errors—it invited them. In *Digital TV Dinner*, Fenton physically interrupted the game's operation mid-play, producing erratic video signals—shimmering color shifts, pixel smearing, and spontaneous image artifacts—that transformed expressive glitch. Rather than correcting or concealing the breakdown, Fenton brought it to the fore, rendering visible the limits of computation as a space for improvisation, aesthetic exploration, and system-aware critique.

Michael Betancourt argues in his broader critique of digital capitalism that glitches are not external disruptions but expressions of a system's internal logic—what he terms "an immanent feature of digital media" (Betancourt, 2017). Rather than treating errors as faults to be hidden or corrected, he frames them as moments that lift the veil of seamless functionality. In a 2017 article specifically addressing Jamie Fenton's *Digital TV Dinner*, Betancourt positions the piece not merely as an aesthetic experiment, but as an early media-critical act—one that exposes the instability of computation itself as a site for intervention, play, and systemic reflection.

Viewed through the lens of immanence and critique, *Digital TV Dinner* does not simply present a visual anomaly; it performs an ideological rupture. Yet the significance of a glitch does not reside in what it reveals—it emerges through how it is taken up: interpreted, responded to, and played with. Glitches are not external disruptions but an immanent feature. They arise from within the system's own operations rather than breaking in from the outside. Building on this, the focus here is not just on the glitch as signal, but on the participant's role in framing and engaging it. Meaning is not embedded in the rupture itself, but generated through the contingent, interpretive relationship between user and system.

This emphasis contrasts with Dutch artist-theorist Rosa Menkman's influential framing in *The Glitch Moment(um)* (2011), where she describes glitches as events that "rupture the

flow of normative modes of perception" and "force the audience to suddenly perceive the inherent politics of a technological system." Menkman's framing highlights how disruption draws attention to invisible infrastructures—compression algorithms that prioritize efficiency over fidelity, user interfaces that naturalize specific forms of interaction, or proprietary file formats that conceal their internal logics. In her reading, the glitch operates as a moment of critical interruption that exposes hidden structures.

While Menkman's approach opens important avenues for reflection, treating glitches as inherently revelatory leaves the participant's interpretive role underdeveloped. This gap carries significant implications, as it may lead to an overemphasis on rupture as self-sufficient. Reconceptualizing the glitch through a semiotic lens—where meaning is constructed through symbols, context, and interpretation—redirects attention to the participant's active role: critique is not guaranteed by the glitch itself, but emerges through inhabiting, navigating, and reimagining disruption through play.

Digital environments often present themselves as stable, seamless, and inevitable, masking the contingency and constructedness beneath their surfaces. Roland Barthes's concept of myth remains particularly useful here. "Myth is depoliticized speech," he writes. "It abolishes the complexity of human acts; it gives them the simplicity of essences" (Barthes, 1957, p. 143). That is, systems shaped by historical, political, and technical decisions come to appear natural and self-evident. *Digital TV Dinner* exemplifies a rupture of this mythic stability. Rather than concealing breakdown, Fenton foregrounds it—recasting disruption not as failure, but as a creative intervention that unsettles the illusion of digital neutrality.

A glitch is not just a momentary interference—it is a breach in the myth of technological coherence, part of what Betancourt identifies as the "aura of the digital": the belief that digital systems are naturally seamless, neutral, and self-contained. That myth, often reinforced through design conventions and cultural expectation, is built on assumptions of predictability, control,

and transparency. Yet such assumptions are not neutral at all; they are deeply formed by the histories of communication and control embedded within digital infrastructures. As Alexander Galloway writes, "If code is the law of the digital realm, then the interface is its ideology" (2006, p. 31). A glitch calls attention to these hidden biases, interrupting the perception that technology simply "works" as intended and expected, or is broken. Instead, it invites us to consider how the "intended" and "expected" are themselves produced—how certain behaviors are encouraged and normalized, while others are constrained or rendered invisible. By surfacing these socio-technical conditions, glitches reframe our relationship to digital systems as contingent, constructed, and open to reinterpretation. From this angle, a glitch doesn't merely signal that something has malfunctioned—it compels a diagnosis, forcing a confrontation with the system's instability and inviting new circuits of meaning, interpretation, and creative engagement.

Systems, Noise, and the Logics of Play

Cybernetics—one of the primary frameworks underpinning the myth of technological coherence—profoundly shaped how we came to see digital systems as stable, efficient, and self-regulating. In the mid-20th century, Norbert Wiener pioneered this vision by defining systems as self-correcting through feedback and control (Wiener, 1948). Later, second-order cyberneticians like Heinz von Foerster and Maturana & Varela complicated—but never fully overturned—that dream, reminding us that the observer always sits inside the loop even as we chase equilibrium. Working in parallel, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver reframed communication itself in quantifiable terms (Shannon & Weaver, 1949), joining Wiener's quest for universal principles to explain biological, mechanical, and informational behavior alike. At the center of cybernetics lies the feedback loop—a recursive structure that measures outputs against inputs and corrects deviations to hold systems in balance. As Wiener mused, "the best material model of a cat is another, or preferably the same, cat" (Wiener, 1945, p. 95), underscoring that a system's legitimacy derives not from abstract representation but from faithful functional replication.

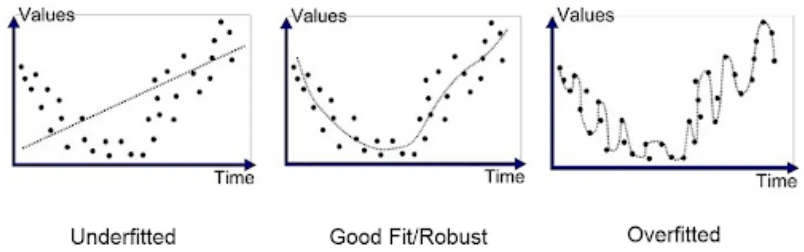

Figure 7. *Illustration of underfitting, good fit, and overfitting*. From P. Bhande (2018).

Prioritizing internal coherence over adaptability prefigures what is now called "overfitting" in artificial intelligence: models that cling so tightly to their training data they collapse when facing the unforeseen (Goodfellow, Bengio, & Courville, 2016). This contrasts with underfitting, where a model fails to capture underlying patterns at all, and with robust models, which strike a balance—generalizing across variation without breaking under deviation (Fig. 7). In both overfit models and tightly regulated systems, the suppression of noise is not an accident but a structural imperative. Systems designed under cybernetic logics inherently resist disruption, framing deviation as a threat to their stability. It is within this context that glitches take on critical significance: they do not merely interfere with system operations; they violate the very assumptions of coherence, predictability, and closure upon which those operations depend.

In communication systems, this translated into a logic of fidelity and clarity. Successful transmission of a message meant preserving a message's intended form from sender to receiver, with minimal interference. Noise—any deviation from that faithful original transmission—was not treated as a possible source of insight or interpretive meaning, but as a threat to coherence: the carefully maintained illusion of internal consistency. Within this framework, encompassing both the Shannon-Weaver model and the feedback-driven logics of cybernetics, noise—and by association, glitches—became errors to be minimized, suppressed, or eliminated.

These models of communication and control, while foundational to the development of digital systems, are built on assumptions that prioritize stability, legibility, and efficiency. Disruption is framed as failure and deviation as something to be corrected—not explored. But when we recognize these assumptions as culturally and technically contingent rather than universal, expanded forms of engagement become possible. Rather than seeing digital systems as closed circuits optimized for clarity and control, we can approach them as open, interpretive terrains—spaces where noise, ambiguity, and unexpected outcomes are not just tolerated, but anticipated as part of the experience of interacting with digital systems. Glitches, in this

view, are not symptoms of dysfunction, but opportunities to interact with systems differently: not as fixed, self-contained mechanisms, but as dynamic environments shaped through interaction, perception, and play. *Digital TV Dinner* exemplifies this rearticulation of disruption. Rather than suppressing breakdowns, Fenton played through them, proving that glitches can be repurposed as tools for expression and reinterpretation.

This tension between control and improvisation allows us to locate the expressive and playful potential of the glitch. Whether deliberately exploited, stumbled upon by accident, or understood as artistic intervention, the glitch disrupts not only a system's technical operations but also the behavioral norms that dictate how users are expected to engage with systems and their glitches. Artists/Players across a range of practices recognize and act upon this generative potential—not by repairing the glitch, but by inhabiting it. In speedrunning—an alternative form of gameplay focused on completing games as quickly as possible—glitches are repurposed as tools of mastery, allowing players to bend a game's logic and exceed its intended pace. In machinima—storytelling that uses video games as cinematic stages—players reorient the game's intended use, employing hacks, capture tools, and interpretive play to transform interactive systems into engines for narrative expression. And in the curated exhibition *Glitch'N'Games*, the glitch is not only recontextualized as a cultural artifact, but placed in dialogue with games to illuminate their mutual entanglement as forces that have shaped each other's form, perception, and cultural meaning. Within these contexts, glitch and game are not separate or conflicting phenomena, but mutually expressive practices—each revealing the aesthetic and operational logic of the other through public interaction, reinterpretation, and play. These interventions demonstrate that engaging with glitches is not merely a deviation from system norms, but a foundational form of digital play—emergent play—in which meaning, agency, and experimentation arise not in spite of systemic disruption, but through it.

Before turning to speedrunning, machinima, and *Glitch'N'Games*, it is worth pausing to more fully consider the

cultural and theoretical weight of "play" itself—particularly in relation to how we have come to understand systems, games, and glitches. Recognizing the constructed nature of ideals such as seamlessness, predictability, and control—values deeply embedded in cybernetic and information-theoretic frameworks—helps clarify why play, and especially glitch-based play, so effectively challenges the myth of ideal digital systems. If early cybernetics cast disruption as problematic noise to be minimized, then a playful orientation offers a counterpoint: it reconfigures noise as potential, deviation as discovery, and glitch as possibility. Within a semiotic lens, apparent breakdowns may instead serve as portals into unexpected modes of interaction.

This understanding of glitch-as-play resonates with earlier foundational accounts of play itself. Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga, in his influential work *Homo Ludens* (1938), positioned play not as an idle pastime but as a fundamental cultural activity—one that shapes language, ritual, art, and community. He famously writes: "Play is older than culture," suggesting that it precedes structured society and operates with its own sense of meaning. Crucially, Huizinga's view of play is marked by a paradox: it is structured, but unpredictable; rule-bound, but spontaneous. It operates in a suspended space where meaning is made through freedom and form in tandem. This volatile quality is precisely what enables play to disrupt the perceived naturalized order of systems—to pierce through what appears stable or self-evident and replace it with transformation, reinterpretation, and renewal.

In *Man, Play, and Games* (1961), French sociologist and anthropologist Roger Caillois expanded on Huizinga's ideas by developing a typology of play, separating the improvisational freedom of paidia from the rule-based structure of ludus. This structure affords a compelling understanding in examining glitch-based interactions. For example, when a player uses a game's camera glitch to create a surreal or unintended cinematic sequence—as in machinima—revisualizing the space not for competition or completion, but for expression, that aligns with paidia: play for its own sake, exploratory and expressive.

In contrast, speedrunners who strategically exploit glitches to gain competitive advantage reflect ludus—structured mastery of a system's rules, even when those rules are bent. Glitches become tools of precision, integrated into rehearsed routes and shared techniques, where mastery is measured not by avoiding instability, but by immersing oneself directly and without bias in the logic of the system itself. This immersion is not about losing oneself in a game's intended story and anticipated play-styles, but about tuning into the system's underlying structures—its limits, feedback, and potential for manipulation. This type of engagement with glitches demonstrates the fact that even the most rigorously coded environments remain fluid and porous, and Caillois's typology helps render how that porosity becomes playable.

These dynamics also return us to Barthes's notion of myth. The ideal of the perfectly stable game—one that functions without seams, behaves predictably, and is "completed" through intended use—is not a technical inevitability. It is a cultural myth, naturalized through marketing promises of polish, community standards of excellence, and development rhetoric of completion. Glitches are not just mistakes but disturbances in the myth itself—proof that even the most coherent system is still subject to reinterpretation. By playing with and through these glitches, users don't just test system boundaries—they show how those boundaries were constructed in the first place, exposing the rudimentary rules, assumptions, and affordances that govern interaction. This dynamic—between open-ended improvisation and encoded control—would go on to shape a new academic perspective.

Ludology emerged as a formal field of inquiry near the end of the 20th-century, and sought to understand games not merely as stories, but as systems of interaction. Prior to this shift, early academic approaches to game studies were predominantly shaped by narratology—the study of narrative structure—which framed games as extensions of literary or cinematic traditions. Scholars such as American literary theorist Janet Murray (1997) emphasized the immersive narrative potential of digital

environments, while American media scholar Henry Jenkins (2004) explored games as spaces of "narrative architecture," where stories are embedded in interactive worlds. In response to these influential perspectives, a group of scholars began articulating an alternative structure grounded in the formal properties of games themselves—particularly their systems, rules, and modes of interaction, rather than their narrative content.

Norwegian media theorist Espen Aarseth introduced the concept of "ergodic literature" in *Cybertext* (1997), arguing that games require non-trivial effort to traverse—that is, they demand conscious decision-making and sustained input from the player, unlike traditional media where meaning is absorbed more passively. This shift relocates meaning-making from passive reception to active interaction. Building on Roger Caillois's distinction between structured and improvisational play, Uruguayan game designer and theorist Gonzalo Frasca (1999) further distinguished between narrative analysis and what he termed ludology, arguing that game studies should prioritize the analysis of rule-based systems over representational or narrative content. Danish game scholar Jesper Juul (2001, 2005) and Finnish literary theorist Markku Eskelinen (2001) expanded on these foundations by demonstrating how game mechanics and player actions co-produce the gameplay experience—disclosing that structure and improvisation are in constant negotiation. Together, these scholars helped establish a vocabulary for understanding games not primarily as narrative scripts, but as emergent systems of meaning shaped through procedural logic, interaction, and play.

This shift away from narrative primacy opened space for glitches to be understood not as interruptions to story, but as windows into system design—sites where feedback, agency, and friction become especially visible. Rather than simply breaking the game, glitches bend it, reconfiguring what forms of engagement are possible or even playable. Jamie Fenton's *Digital TV Dinner* anticipated this reframing, treating technological instability not as an obstacle but as expressive glitch material—displaying the system's vulnerability as a space for intervention.

Put differently: digital systems aren't closed scripts—they are environments where meaning is made, not prescribed. As Salen and Zimmerman (2004) explain, many digital games give rise to emergent play: unscripted, often unpredictable forms of interaction that arise from the interplay of simple rules and player improvisation. This contrasts with progressive play, which follows a linear, designer-directed path. Glitch play is one form of emergent play, sparked specifically by system instability and rupture—but emergence doesn't always require breakdown. It also arises through reinterpretation, deviation, or creative misuse that stays within the system's operational bounds. A striking example of emergent play occurred during the *Corrupted Blood incident* (2005) in World of Warcraft. The event began as a debuff cast by the end boss Hakkar the Soulflayer in the Zul'Gurub dungeon—intended to remain confined to that battle instance. However, through a combination of overlooked mechanics and creative player behavior, the disease escaped into the broader game world via summoned pets and teleporting characters, triggering an unplanned pandemic across the entire server. Players responded in wildly different ways: some attempted to quarantine cities, others acted as healers or spreaders, and many simply observed the chaos. The result was an unscripted, dynamic, and socially complex episode that neither the game designers had anticipated nor could contain (See: Lofgren & Fefferman, 2007).

Though not a glitch in the technical sense—since the code executed as written—the *Corrupted Blood incident* (Fig. 8) functioned similarly: it introduced rupture, revealed systemic fragility, and gave rise to emergent play on a massive scale. (It also offered an unexpected parallel to real-world social dynamics during pandemics, though this thesis focuses primarily on its significance as an instance of playful systemic disruption.) As players improvised in response, what unfolded was not a breakdown of design but a reconfiguration of it—affirming Salen and Zimmerman's observation that unexpected disruptions prompt creative reconfiguration. In doing so, they extend both semiotic and cybernetic critiques: rules do not guarantee order, and noise is not merely interference. Instead, such disruptions

function as doorways. When players choose to stay with a glitch—or any rupture—and explore it rather than reject it, they participate in what might be understood as the **agency of disruption**: the capacity to intervene in digital systems not by restoring some presumed natural order, but by reworking the logic, expectations, and meanings that shape how systems and their users are guided toward particular behaviors and outcomes.

This interwoven history of system design, meaning-making, and ludic experimentation sets the stage for understanding glitch-oriented play as a crucial mode of engagement. Engaging with glitches is not a decorative gesture—something marginal or nonessential to digital systems—but a meaningful mode of encountering them differently: through play.

Figure 8. *Screenshot of the urban center during the Corrupted Blood incident in World of Warcraft. From archon210 (2017).*

Speedrunning: Reconfiguring Mastery through Glitch-Based Play

Speedrunning—the practice of completing a game by achieving the fastest possible time, often through the creative exploitation of unintended mechanics—demonstrates how the agency of disruption operates not as an obstacle to mastery, but as its foundation. Within the speedrunner community, players engage in highly intentional acts of subversion, not only to finish games faster, but to explore, document, and reconfigure the systems that structure their experience. Unlike casual play, which typically follows a designer's intended pathways and narrative pacing, speedrunning embraces detours, glitches, and exploits as strategic tools. These expressive glitches are not subordinate in significance—they are cultivated.

This logic of mastery through manipulation reflects what American media historian Henry Lowood, known for his work on the preservation and performance of digital games, describes as a form of community-authored performance. In his 2009 writing on tool-assisted speedruns and game modification, Lowood emphasizes that these acts are not simply personal feats of dexterity, but cultural expressions shaped by collaboration, iteration, and shared technical fluency (Lowood, 2009). Speedrunning is not just a matter of moving quickly—it is a sustained, performative inquiry into how systems behave under pressure and how their logic can be bent to new ends.

One of the most influential forces shaping this participatory ethos was id Software, the independent game studio behind *DOOM* (1993)—a landmark first-person shooter known for its fast-paced gameplay, immersive 3D environments, and networked multiplayer. Yet *DOOM*'s most lasting legacy may lie in what became known as mod culture: a grassroots movement

in which players alter, remix, and extend commercial games, treating them not as finished products but as malleable systems. id Software actively encouraged this mode of engagement by releasing editing tools, sharing asset files, and eventually making the game's source code public in 1997. Rather than discourage technical tampering, the studio openly supported it—establishing a new precedent in which game communities were not just consumers, but co-creators. Mod culture refers to both the tools and the ethos of creative intervention: the belief that a game's design is not fixed, but available for reinterpretation through experimentation, hacking, and collaborative tinkering. As Henry Lowood notes, *DOOM* "was more than a game; it was a platform for performance" (Lowood, 2009). This openness helped cultivate a mentality where play extended beyond the screen—into the code, the mechanics, and the expressive edges of the system.

Many iconic speedrunning strategies emerged from this culture of experimentation. In *DOOM* (1993), players discovered techniques like strafe-running—a movement exploit that combines forward and sideways motion to increase speed beyond the game's intended limit—and rocket-jumping (Fig. 9), where players used the explosive force of their own weapons to propel themselves to otherwise unreachable areas. These tactics, initially uncovered through accidental misbehavior, quickly evolved into formal techniques—core elements in the community's shared metagame. Crucially, speedrunners did not reject the game's system but inhabited it differently. Like Jamie Fenton inserting and removing cartridges mid-play in *Digital TV Dinner*, speedrunners test the elasticity of digital systems, treating them not as closed designs but as provisionally stabilized environments open to adjustment.

This participatory ethos extends beyond individual runs into a broader, collective process of discovery and reinterpretation. Through community-maintained wikis, shared video walkthroughs, and evolving strategies on forums and leaderboards, speedrunning transforms games into living texts—sites of collaborative authorship shaped through iterative engagement.

Figure 9. *Screenshot of the rocket-jump path to the E3M6 secret exit in DOOM (1993). From* WhiteshirtGames (2019).

This is not a rejection of structure, but a reconfiguration of it: a subversive form of ludus, where rules are learned intimately only to be warped with precision and style. Understanding this kind of rule-bound creativity benefits from looking beyond video games alone, toward systems where structure itself becomes a generative force. Here, glitches and exploits gain significance not merely by occurring, but by being recognized, explored, and shared. As Betancourt (2017) argues, the meaning of a glitch is not intrinsic; it depends on its framing and reception. Within speedrunning, moments of instability become tools of mastery through this iterative engagement—turning fleeting disruptions into sustained sites of agency.

A revealing parallel exists in *Game of Life* (1970), a cellular automaton created by British mathematician John Conway and popularized by *Martin Gardner's Scientific American column* (Gardner, 1970). Designed as a mathematical simulation rather than a traditional game, *Game of Life* operates through simple local rules applied to a grid of cells, each toggling between "alive" or "dead" states based on its neighbors (Fig. 10). Despite its minimal constraints, the system produces complex, often surprising patterns—not through top-down orchestration,

but through emergent, unpredictable interaction. Like speedrunning, it shows how even tightly rule-governed systems yield unexpected possibilities through active engagement with systemic instability.

Although not a digital game in the conventional sense, *Game of Life* quickly became integral to early computing culture. As it was implemented on personal computers and adapted by programmers, artists, and systems theorists, it came to exemplify what American complexity theorist John Holland (1992) termed a "complex adaptive system"—a network of interacting agents whose collective behavior gives rise to emergent patterns, adaptation, and unpredictability. *Game of Life* helped shape a broader understanding of how simple rule sets could generate dynamic, open-ended outcomes, laying the groundwork for fields such as artificial life, generative art, and interactive design. Its appeal lies in its indeterminacy: no two starting configurations yield the same result, and comprehension arises only through sustained observation, testing, and adjustment. In this way, Game of Life serves as a conceptual touchstone for practices like speedrunning, where knowledge is not imposed but developed through feedback, experimentation, and staying with the system long enough for its latent behaviors to surface.

Speedrunning reflects this same logic of discovery in how players do not progress through a game by following preordained paths, but rather engage in recursive exploration—probing for thresholds, improvising strategies, and refining their approach over time. Like Conway's simulation, a game system's internal logic becomes legible only through sustained interaction. This is not mastery imposed from above, but one that emerges from within—an unfolding of what the system does when stretched, rerouted, or reimagined. In this sense, speedrunning exemplifies emergent play: not play dictated by a designer's script, but arising from the friction between system limits and player creativity. It's a form of improvisational fluency, where meaning is not found in the intended path, but in what deviates from it.

The polished stability promised by the aura of the digital—central to early cybernetic ideals of efficiency and legibility—is repeatedly undone by the speedrunner's practice.

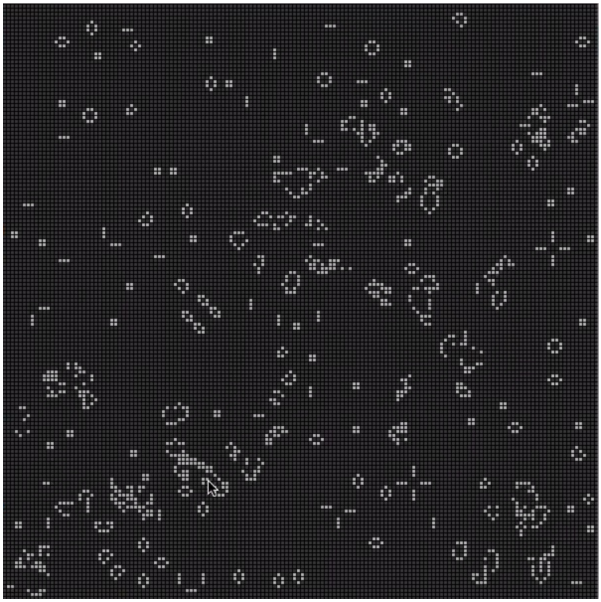

Figure 10. *Screenshot of Conway's Game of Life in Processing*. From M. Berry (2020).

Just as *Digital TV Dinner* exposed the physical and aesthetic vulnerabilities of a game system, speedrunning unearths the ideological constructions of control that shape digital play. Glitches, here, are not nuisances to be fixed, but performances of alternative logic. They are the medium through which mastery and imagination converge.

Ultimately, speedrunning operates as a generative friction—a site where precision and improvisation blur, and where fluency with the system includes knowing when and how to bend it. This fluency is not merely technical but interpretive: a way of reading systems otherwise. By engaging rupture not as failure but as opportunity, speedrunners transform breakdown into breakthrough. Their play reasserts agency in systems designed to feel seamless, exposing the contingency beneath the surface and making it playable. In doing so, speedrunning extends the legacy of glitch-based experimentation initiated by *Digital TV Dinner*, embedding it within a living digital vernacular of performance, creativity, and critique.

Machinima:Reframing Function Through Narrative Subversion

Machinima—a blend of "machine" and "cinema"—refers to the practice of creating films by repurposing video game engines as animation tools. Emerging in the late 1990s alongside the rise of game modifications and digital video editing software, machinima artists used games not merely as play spaces but as platforms for cinematic storytelling, satire, and experimental media. By manipulating in-game assets, camera angles, and even glitches, they treated the game world as a raw material for new forms of narrative expression.

If speedrunning reveals how glitches can be used to reconfigure structure and mastery, machinima demonstrates how these same disruptions can be recontextualized into tools of narrative and creative authorship. While speedrunners use glitches to shave off seconds, machinima artists use them to craft alternate meanings—to rewire games into cinematic spaces, improvising new forms from within existing structures. This practice often involves manipulating glitches, in-game behaviors, camera hacks, and unintended scripts to choreograph sequences that the original game was never designed to support. Here, the glitch is not an interruption but a compositional technique: a means of exposing the backstage structure of control and reframing it into a site of expressive possibility (Marino, 2004).

A seminal example is *Diary of a Camper* (1996), produced by United Ranger Films using *Quake* (1996)—another first-person shooter developed by id Software that was notable for its early use of real-time 3D rendering and modifiability. What had been a multiplayer deathmatch arena

Figure 11. *Screenshot of the machinima film Diary of a Camper.* From United Ranger Films (1996).

became a set, a narrative location, a scene (Fig. 11). Through careful manipulation of the game's mechanics, including camera placement and player behavior, the creators invented new roles and structures within a system which did not anticipate accommodating such creations. This performative reworking mirrors *Digital TV Dinner* not in its visual aesthetic, but in its conceptual impulse: to make visible and malleable what digital systems present as fixed. *Digital TV Dinner* may be retroactively understood as a form of proto-machinima—an early act of storytelling through systemic misbehavior and performative engagement.

What distinguishes machinima is its sustained interest in "metacommunication"—a term introduced by English anthropologist Gregory Bateson to describe communication about communication, or cues that frame how messages should be interpreted (Bateson, 1972). In machinima, this often takes the form of deliberate gestures that foreground the constructedness of the game environment and its storytelling apparatus. While speedrunning emphasizes dexterity and tempo, machinima focuses on reframing and remixing intention.

A powerful example of this critical reframing is found in Peggy Ahwesh's *She Puppet* (2001), a machinima work that repurposes footage from *Tomb Raider*—the 1996 action-adventure game developed by British studio Core Design, featuring Lara Croft, a hyper-athletic archaeologist-adventurer known as much for her stylized toughness as for her exaggerated, sexualized design. Rather than playing the game "properly," Ahwesh captures moments of Lara wandering, glitching, and failing—emphasizing the artificiality of the character and the ideological structures embedded in the game's mechanics (Fig. 12). In *She Puppet*, glitches, mechanical repetition, and slippages in AI behavior are not accidents to be hidden but tools of narrative rupture, drawing attention to the gap between system behavior and narrative intention.

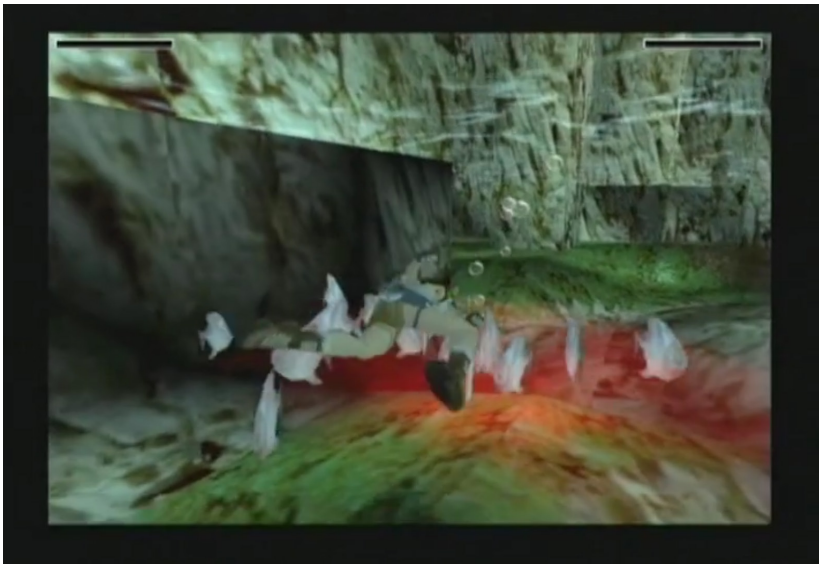

Figure 12. *Screenshot of the machinima film She Puppet.* From P. Ahwesh (2001).

Glitches act as semiotic disturbances—not because they inherently carry meaning, but because they reinterrupt the expected flow of signification within the game. A misbehaving

physics engine or AI pathfinding error disrupts the anticipated relationship between input and output, opening space for critique. Rather than derail the work, these disruptions are folded into the story's rhythm and visual logic. Through this act of reinterpretation, the glitch becomes expressive; meaningful. Not for what it is, but for how it is used. *She Puppet* illustrates that meaning in digital systems is not embedded or fixed but emerges through disruption, adaptation, and playful, critical inhabitation. By treating mechanical failure as storytelling, *She Puppet* rescripts the system through critical play—transforming disruption into authorship and glitch into a medium for critique.

This interpretive approach exemplifies what Henry Lowood (2009) describes as high-performance play—a mode of performative authorship in which players creatively push the expressive limits of game systems through technical fluency, experimentation, and iteration. In machinima, this performance is not measured by efficiency or speed, but by reconfiguration: the act of bending mechanics and aesthetic constraints to tell stories the system wasn't built to tell. Rather than relying on conventional cinematic tools, machinima creators exploit glitches, bugs, and unpredictable behaviors to produce meaning. Here, the performance is expressivity within constraint—co-authoring narrative by navigating what the system affords, interrupts, and unexpectedly reveals. This, too, is a form of emergent play: not linear progression but expressive deviation, where the story unfolds from the tension between what the system permits and what the creator/player dares to demand of it.

This approach underscores the ludological insight that games are not just rules and narrative, but generative spaces (Frasca, 1999; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Just as glitch-based speedrunning operates within a modified form of ludus, machinima represents a unique blend of paidia and authorship (Caillois, 1961). The mode of play for a game isn't in the original challenge or reward structure—it is in the reinterpretation: the decision to treat a combat system as a

drama engine, or an object glitch as a plot device. In doing so, machinima artists exploit what Jesper Juul (2005) calls the "half-real" nature of games—their simultaneous existence as rule-based systems and fictional worlds.

By capturing, scripting, and repurposing moments of instability, machinima destabilizes the designer-player binary. It operates within the logic of systems like *Digital TV Dinner*, turning breakdown into medium. These works exhibit not just aesthetic ingenuity, but a critical orientation—one that challenges the "myth" of games as closed, self-sufficient texts. Much like Fenton's gesture of jostling the cartridge, machinima invites friction. It leans into the system's slippages to produce meaning that exceeds the intended.

Machinima is not merely derivative of earlier glitch-based practices, but an evolution of them—one that internalizes the logic of disruption and redeploys it narratively. Its insight lies in revealing how even the most rule-bound system can be reopened as a field of representation, co-authorship, and narrative play. The glitch, in this context, is not simply an exploit—it is a story waiting to be told differently.

Glitch'N'Games

Figure 13. *Entrance of LIKELIKE Arcade and viewers engaging with work by Sky Goodman in a room at Wick Monet.*
Photograph by the author (2024).

Held across two venues in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in October 2024 (Fig. 13), *Glitch'N'Games* served as a culminating case study of glitch-oriented play as both creative method and critical inquiry. Co-curated by Bee Nix (Suture Blue)—a Pittsburgh-based artist, researcher, and curator whose practice spans glitch animation, game art, and experimental video/performance—alongside Nick Liberatore (royb0t), a Chicago-based new media artist known for blending glitch video practices with industrial electronic music, and John Bumstead (rdklinc), a Minneapolis-based visual artist and Apple refurbisher who transforms hardware failures into aesthetic processes—the exhibition brought together over thirty artists whose works bridged Glitch Art and video games. Drawing direct inspiration from Jamie Fenton's *Digital T.V. Dinner*, *Glitch'N'Games* not only highlighted a historical lineage, but illuminated the under-discussed interplay of games, glitches,

and play.

The exhibition extended the questions raised in *Digital T.V. Dinner*—not just about what glitches reveal, but about how they are used. If Fenton's 1978 work marked an origin point for glitch as artistic intervention, *Glitch'N'Games* traced how that same impulse has evolved across mediums, modes, and players. Here, glitches were not static artifacts but dynamic sites of engagement, shaped by how participants interpreted, inhabited,

Figure 14. *Participant playing with BPMC's circuit-bent PS2 installation at Glitch'N'Games.* Photograph by the author (2024).

and repurposed them.

Though glitch art scholarship often emphasizes visual or code-based ruptures, and game studies tend to focus on systems, narratives, and player agency, few frameworks directly explore how glitch and play function together. *Glitch'N'Games* framed its central inquiry accordingly: how do glitches and play co-construct one another? The answer unfolded not in theory alone, but through a layout of interactive works that staged instability as an invitation rather than an error. The glitch, when engaged through play, became an interpretive threshold—a moment where meaning wasn't revealed, but co-produced.

To reinforce this participatory framing, the opening night at LIKELIKE Arcade (October 4, 2024, 7–11pm) began with a curatorial arrangement designed to establish glitch potential without over-determining it. Across the venue's entrance, Oregon-based multimedia artist Drew Pauper's (BPMC) circuit-bent PlayStation 2 (Fig. 14) was prominently positioned across from the doorway, rigged with an expansive switchboard and camera that fed glitchy, real-time distortions of the viewer onto a 55" CRT screen. The system's continual feedback invited participants not only to watch, but to manipulate, their own image through physical inputs—an act of live misbehavior that exemplified glitch as aesthetic material and participatory condition.

To the right of the entrance, Kevin Mercer—an Illinois-based artist, indie game developer, and assistant professor—presented the experimental 3D game *Burger Inspector '94: Cheese Edition* (Fig. 15), housed in an arcade cabinet provided by the venue. The game casts the player as a fast food quality assurance worker tasked with inspecting a single cheeseburger—a premise that quickly unravels into a surreal meditation on labor, control, and procedural absurdity. Situated within the niche of workplace and interface horror, players observe a cheeseburger through the lens of a security camera and must provoke and inspect it incessantly until it becomes sentient enough to respond. Though the game has a narrative endpoint, many participants walked away before reaching

it—unsure how to proceed, mistaking its ambiguity for a lack of structure, or losing interest in the playstyle it demanded. This response echoed one of the exhibition's recurring questions: when systems break or resist interpretation, what compels us to keep playing? *Burger Inspector* doesn't answer—it performs the question.

Figure 15. *Screenshot of the video game Burger Inspector '94: Cheese Edition.* From K. R. Mercer (2024).

To the left of the entrance, Kaspar Ravel—a Brussels-based artist, teacher, and researcher in tactical new media—presented *Almost Chess*, a live installation staged at a small table outfitted with a slip-screen laptop, microphone and headphones, printed rules, and a 20-sided die (Fig. 16). Visitors were invited into chess matches that rarely followed traditional rules. Ravel's practice, which critically engages systems through poetic and political interventions, exemplifies the creative misuse of established forms.

In *Almost Chess*, participants roll the 20-sided die to determine which of twenty rule-sets—ranging from classical to historical to absurd—Ravel would adopt during a live video call. For instance, a roll of 15 invoked the 'Mechanical Turk' mode, wherein Ravel simulated the infamous 18th-century chess-playing automaton, blending performance with historical critique. Relating the work to Bateson's concept of metacommunication—the signaling of how an interaction should be interpreted—*Almost Chess* operated at the threshold

Figure 16. *Visitors playing Almost Chess with Kaspar Ravel during Glitch'N'Games.* Photograph by the author. (2024).

between game and performance: the rules were not hidden or naturalized, but made conspicuous and strange (Bateson, 1972). The piece transformed the structure of chess into a space for symbolic and material subversion—recasting play itself as an expressive glitch that reorients behavior within known systems.

Further in and to the left of BPMC's installation, Monyé Ford—a Jacksonville-based 3D artist, educator, and interactive systems designer—presented *Code Crusaders*, a game developed in Unreal Engine and projected large on the gallery wall (Fig. 17). The work centered debugging as its core mechanic, inviting players to resolve system irregularities in pursuit of linear progression. While visually glitchy, its structure reflected a more conventional systems logic: glitches functioned not as generative ruptures, but as obstacles to be corrected. Within this framing, the glitch was not a site of interpretive play, but a

stylized friction point within a goal-oriented system. Ford's piece reinforced a central premise of the exhibition—that the significance of a glitch does not reside in disruption alone, but in how that disruption is framed: as something to fix, or something to dwell in.

Figure 17. *Monyé Ford and her mother playing Code Crusaders at Glitch'N'Games.* Photograph from the author. (2024).

Nick Briz's *Tactical Misuse* installation, arranged at a table with free floppy disks and a looping instructional video, invited visitors to experiment with browser-based scripts. One such script, *Spin Elements* (Fig. 18), caused all web page elements to rotate in a disorienting loop, disrupting conventional notions of navigability. As a foundational figure in glitch theory and pedagogy, Briz has long advocated for the creative misuse of digital systems—not merely as aesthetic provocation, but as critical practice. His work expands the glitch beyond a visual or technical phenomenon, positioning it as a participatory method for rethinking how platforms govern behavior. He writes that "glitching, as a process, is inherently reliant upon technology yet surprisingly accessible and executable," and that it "lends itself to pedagogy as much as it serves as a ruse to traditional modes of artistic instruction that

codify random acts of creativity" (Briz, 2010). *Tactical Misuse* echoes Alexander Galloway's assertion that protocol shapes action: Briz's scripts reframe web interfaces not as passive tools, but as expressive systems open to reinterpretation. The installation's form—obscure media, playful signage, accessible code—embodied the democratizing ethos of glitch as method: a tool anyone can use to poke at the myth of seamlessness and claim agency from within.

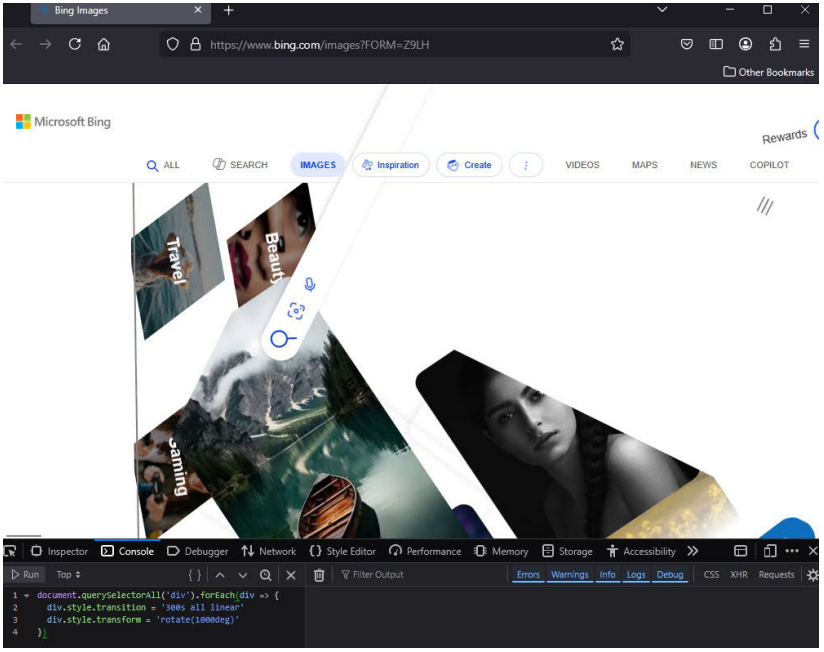

Figure 18. *Screenshot taken using the web browser script Spin Elements.* From N. Briz. (2024).

Thorne Brandt—a Chicago-based creative technologist and founder of Digital Art Demo Space (D.A.D.S.), a DIY venue showcasing games as art, interactive installations, and audiovisual experiences—contributed a collaborative sound installation that became the evening's audiovisual pulse. Projected large on the wall to the right of Ravel's installation (Fig. 19) and activated at 8:30pm, it was the last piece to go live and the most immersive. Developed in Unity and custom-engineered to communicate with Discord's API, the installation

allowed up to twelve participants to shape the generative soundscape via a web interface, while an unlimited number could send real-time commands through a Discord bot. The resulting audio—eerie, layered, and unpredictable—sonified misalignment as it happened. Integrated into the gallery's speaker system, Brandt's piece became the exhibition's soundtrack—an ambient reminder that instability can be

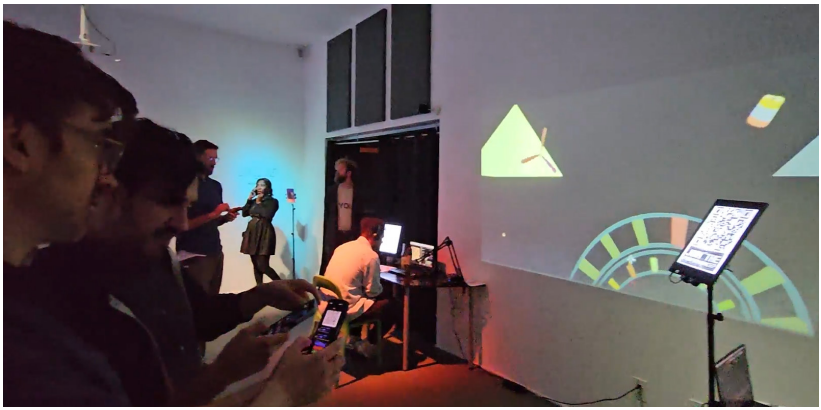

Figure 19. *Thorne Brandt and Eric Lorenz engaging with Brandt's collaborative web music machine during opening night at Glitch'N'Games.* Photograph by the author. (2024).

collaborative and beautiful. Here, glitch became not just audible but shared: a co-produced event unfolding through layered participation, defying equilibrium and showcasing emergence as meaning-making. The piece enacted a central premise of this thesis: that glitches, when engaged playfully, transform breakdown into collective improvisation—turning systems into live, evolving interfaces.

The second day of the exhibition (October 5, 2024), held at Wick Monet Gallery, featured a full slate of live events alongside a gallery exhibition. This visual component presented Glitch Art works that explored the interplay of system failure, interactivity, and aesthetic experimentation. Curated through an open call, the exhibition showcased over thirty artists, with the full list documented on the exhibition website (Nix, 2024). The live events began at 10am with a ROM Glitching workshop

(Fig. 20) led by Sabato Visconti (sabatobox) and Jordan Bortner (JPEGSTRIPES)—two prominent Glitch artists known for their evocative use of ROM corruption techniques (Sharma, 2020). Visconti opened with a presentation highlighting examples from his practice and others working in the form, before he and Bortner guided participants through hands-on experimentation using the *Vinesauce ROM Corruptor*—an open-source tool by

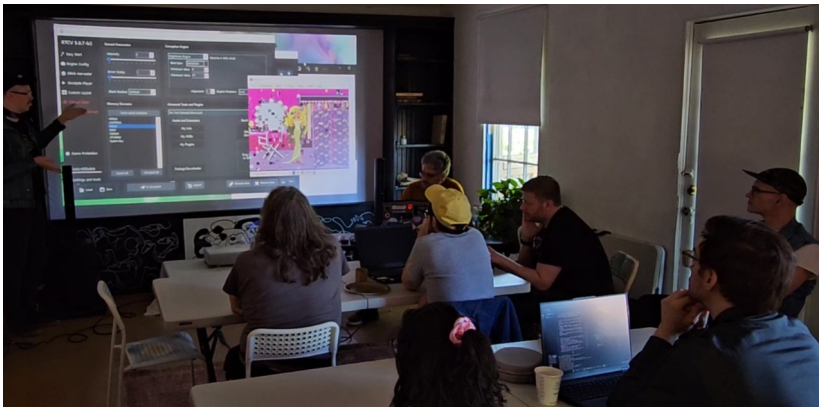

Figure 20. *Sabato Visconti and Jordan Bortner presenting a ROM glitching workshop during Glitch'N'Games.*
Photograph by the author. (2024).

Ryan "Rikerz" Sammon that enables users to deliberately corrupt vintage game files. Using titles like *Barbie: Super Model* (SNES, 1992), participants manipulated hexadecimal values to create fragmented visuals, distorted audio, and unpredictable in-game behaviors. Visconti and Bortner translated the technical processes—hexadecimal offsets, memory addresses—into accessible explanations, emphasizing the materiality of code and the expressive potential of disruption. This direct engagement with legacy software revealed digital instability not as a flaw to be corrected, but as a pliable medium for creative misuse, subversion, and reimagination.

At 2:30pm, these explorations of systemic instability, playful misbehavior, and reinterpretive engagement resurfaced in the *Discussion Game*, a participatory prompt game developed by Bee Nix. Designed as a structured-yet-fluid conversation

tool, the game invited participants to draw color-coded shape cards that determined discussion prompts centered on glitch, control, and play (Fig. 21). Seated around the gallery, artists, theorists, and gamers—including Jamie Fenton, Nick Briz, Anna-Christine Sands, Sabato Visconti, Kaspar Ravel, Nick Liberatore, Nilson Carroll, Thorne Brandt, Adam Wolf, and John Bumstead—entered into dialogue that oscillated between personal anecdote and theoretical reflection. Topics drifted from analog signal paths to quantum computing, from the aesthetics of failure to surveillance logic.

Figure 21. *Playing card from Discussion Game at Glitch'N'Games.* Photograph by N. Briz. (2024).

As participants riffed off one another's thoughts, the glitch functioned less as a static object of critique and more as a generative lens: a metaphor, a rupture, and an invitation. In the opening moments of the *Discussion Game*, Jamie Fenton framed the glitch as inherently entwined with process, stating that designers "should think of glitches differently" because "it's part of the process" (Nix, 00:00:48). Her perspective, grounded

in decades of experience, set a tone that emphasized glitch not as mistake but as medium. Later, Nick Briz articulated a complementary stance, observing that "to the computer, there is no glitch—it's just doing what you told it to" (Nix, 00:05:35), shifting attention toward how interpretation—rather than rupture alone—determines meaning. These exchanges unfolded alongside reflections on determinism, randomness, and agency, drawing connections between technical operations and human expectations. Meaning, then, was not excavated from the glitch itself but co-produced in the social act of framing and response—playfully, critically, and communally.

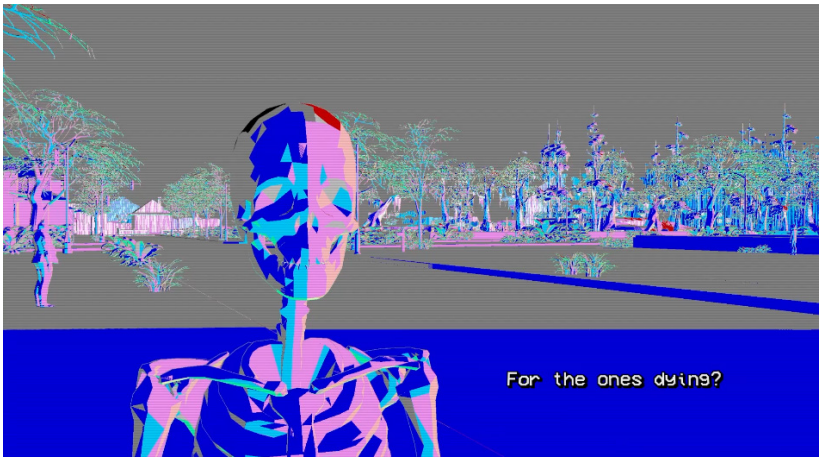

Figure 22. *Scene from the machinima film The Simulation Must Continue, shown during Glitch'N'Games.*
From R. Alhague. (2024).

That evening around 6:30pm, the exhibition shifted into a mediatized mode with a screening of *The Simulation Must Continue* (Fig. 22), a machinima work by Ras Alhague—a Polish digital artist based in Austin, TX, known for their glitch-based self-portraiture and explorations of gender, identity, and sexuality. Created using screen recordings from The Sims 4, the film opens in first-person view, following a sim named Ras through the monotony of daily routine before freezing, cutting to black, and revealing a message: "ah, shit. I left the mods on." What unfolds is a chaotic montage of hacked add-ons,

broken animations, and cascading program warnings, edited into a self-reflexive narrative of instability. Like Peggy Ahwesh's *She Puppet*, Alhague's work uses glitch to fracture coherence, reorient authorship, and expose the fragility of simulated life. Subtitled text overlays the distorted closing scenes, mourning in-game characters "forever stuck in the last loop of their animation," while the system—unfeeling and unbothered—prepares to shut down. Glitch here is not just visual noise, but a conceptual break, a means of reflecting on what gets preserved, erased, or overwritten in systems built on the illusion that nothing is ever truly lost.

Figure 23. *From Games to Glitch, a presentation by Jamie Fenton during Glitch'N'Games.* Photograph by A. C. Sands. (2024).

Finally, Jamie Fenton's live demonstration of her retrofitted Bally Astrocade began at 7:30pm. Fenton first delivered a talk tracing her trajectory "*From Games to Glitch*" (Fig. 23) before leading the live demonstration where visitors were invited to experiment directly with the same interface Fenton once used in 1978, triggering unpredictable outcomes through button presses and joystick gestures. This was no passive homage—it was electric. Attendees laughed, gasped,

and cheered at one another's creations, caught up not only in the immediacy of digital disorder but in the layered atmosphere of the moment: Fenton, a pioneer of Glitch Art, stood among a room of people eager to engage with the historical, technical, and playful significance of the act unfolding. Many attendees were entirely new to glitch practices, completing a generative loop—where early experimentation was reactivated, reframed, and shared anew. History wasn't repeating—it was glitching forward. Fenton was not simply referenced but fully present—an active participant, a co-player in a room still alive with curiosity about what might emerge when systems defy the behaviors we've come to expect.

Throughout the show, one question kept surfacing: how does meaning form when a system slips? As Barthes warns, designs ossify into myth the moment we treat them as nature; a glitch pries that shell open. But, to borrow Betancourt's point, the crack counts only if someone steps through it (Fig. 24). *Code Crusaders* let the glitch sit as a visual metaphor; *Almost Chess* turned it into a rule-warping mechanic; Briz's browser scripts brandished it as direct critique. Together they demonstrate that rupture alone is inert—it has to be noticed, explored, and reworked before it starts to matter.

Glitch'N'Games ultimately demonstrated that glitch-based play is not a stylistic gesture or technical error—it is a way of engaging systems that reveals their contingency and playability. It invites us to treat rules not as limits but as openings—structures to be interpreted, bent, or rerouted through interaction. No one needed to know theory to feel what was happening; every misfire and misuse became a form of semiotic play. Glitch wasn't a symbol—it was something you participated with. Participants didn't simply follow the system—they traced and pushed its edges, rethought its paths, and made space for unexpected things to take shape. *Glitch'N'Games* did more than illustrate the thesis's claims—it enacted them, bringing theoretical commitments into material form and showing how glitch, when held open by play, becomes not just an object of inquiry but a collaborative, unfolding method.

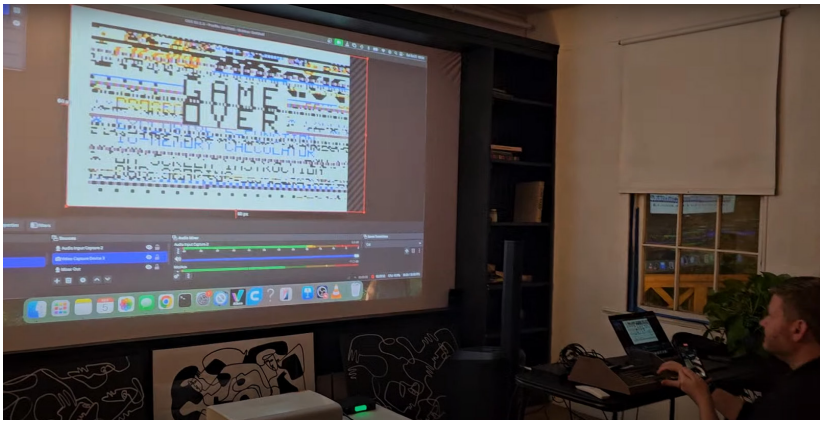

Figure 24. *Nick Liberatore, among other visitors, creating glitches using a retrofitted Bally Astrocade provided by Jamie Fenton at Glitch'N'Games.* Photograph by the author. (2024).

Conclusion: Toward a Playful Reorientation of Systems

Glitches remind us that systems are never as closed as they appear. They open seams in structures we are told are seamless, interrupt flows that seem inevitable, and expose assumptions too often mistaken for facts. Glitch-oriented play offers a means of interacting with these disruptions not as errors, but as creative invitations. From Jamie Fenton's *Digital TV Dinner* to the strategic ingenuity of speedrunners, the narrative repurposing of machinima artists, and the participatory misbehavior of *Glitch'N'Games*, we have seen the glitch operate not as technical failure, but as a participatory threshold. Play makes that threshold legible—turning rupture into meaning.

Returning to the three guiding principles introduced at the outset, we now see their stakes more clearly:

Glitches must be perceived to generate meaning. A glitch does not speak on its own. It must be seen, framed, and inhabited for it to become significant. Its rupture alone is not what makes it powerful—it is the encounter that follows.

Glitches create new opportunities. When a system behaves unexpectedly, it does not only collapse—it offers a pivot point, a moment where play reframes, reroutes, and reconfigures meaning.

Participants possess the agency to interact with glitches in ways that expand digital experience—but only if they recognize themselves as participants. The capacity to notice, stay with, and rework a glitch is not a given. It is a learned fluency, a cultivated posture of play.

And play itself—this sphere of iterative, affective, relational, and expressive engagement—is not simply a behavior. It is a mode of knowing. It is how we co-create meaning with systems. It is what

allows reconfiguration, not only of the system, but of our place within it.

These principles become especially vivid when we examine how the works in *Glitch'N'Games* resisted the cybernetic premise that disruption must be corrected. From interactive installations that rewarded misuse to collaborative audio works shaped by overlapping, imprecise user inputs, each piece explored friction and instability not as failure, but as foundation. Participants were not given one clear path, but were invited to interfere, distort, and co-create. The exhibition embraced misalignment and indeterminacy as modes of participation, not deviations from a norm. These works didn't aim to stabilize or resolve systems—they asked what else could emerge when systems were allowed to remain in flux.

This is where the limitations of cybernetic thinking become clearest. Rooted in ideals of prediction, control, and self-regulation, cybernetic design seeks to minimize deviation and maintain systemic integrity. But glitch-based play defies these imperatives. Rather than reinforcing equilibrium, it offers interpretive space. It turns failure into energy. Even when second-order cybernetics attempted to reframe systems as recursive and adaptive, the foundational logics of the original framework—stability, feedback, and control—continue to shape our relationship with technology today. These logics remain embedded not only in technical design but in the cultural metaphors we use to describe how systems should behave—from software interfaces to algorithmic moderation to AI-generated responses. The language of regulation hasn't faded; it has been absorbed into the systems themselves. If the glitch reveals where a system slips, it also prompts us to ask: who is the system calibrated for, and what kinds of play, disruption, or participation does it permit—or preclude?

Play, by contrast, interrupts these logics. It carves out room for instability, experimentation, and ambiguity. In doing so, it offers a countermodel to the dominant narrative of seamlessness that guides much of today's digital design. When we treat disruption not as collapse but as invitation, we begin to

see how systems might evolve through engagement rather than enforcement.

That opportunities open through playful engagement with disruption is not hypothetical—it's observable in how systems become more legible, malleable, and co-authored when glitch is treated as invitation rather than error. It is realized in *Digital TV Dinner*'s material interference, in speedrunning's tactical improvisation, in machinima's repurposing of engines for narrative, and in *Glitch'N'Games*' intentional misuse of tools, interfaces, and platforms. These are not accidents or ornamental gestures. They demonstrate that rupture alone is insufficient—it is the interpretive, playful response that reconfigures meaning.

Figure 25. *Screenshot of the video game Papers, Please.* From L. Pope. (2013).

Designers and players are not merely users, but co-constructors of meaning—whether through gameplay, subversion, or design itself. *Papers, Please* (2013), a 2D puzzle-simulation game by Lucas Pope (Fig. 25), casts the player as a border control officer in a fictional authoritarian state, using the mechanics of document inspection to highlight the bureaucratic violence embedded in seemingly mundane tasks. *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017), a minimalist 3D climbing game, places the

player in control of a man in a cauldron using a hammer to scale surreal platformer landscapes (Fig. 26)—where failure is frequent, progress is easily undone, and frustration becomes part of the aesthetic. These examples—*Papers, Please* and *Getting Over It*, as well as works like Kaspar Ravel's rule-altering gameplay, and Nick Briz's misused browser tools featured in *Glitch'N'Games*—expose that systems can be built not only to contain play, but to critique themselves—offering friction not as flaw, but as reflection. To engage with glitches this way is to not only recognize instability, but to ask what kinds of stability we are being guided toward—and to consider what else could be made playable in its place.

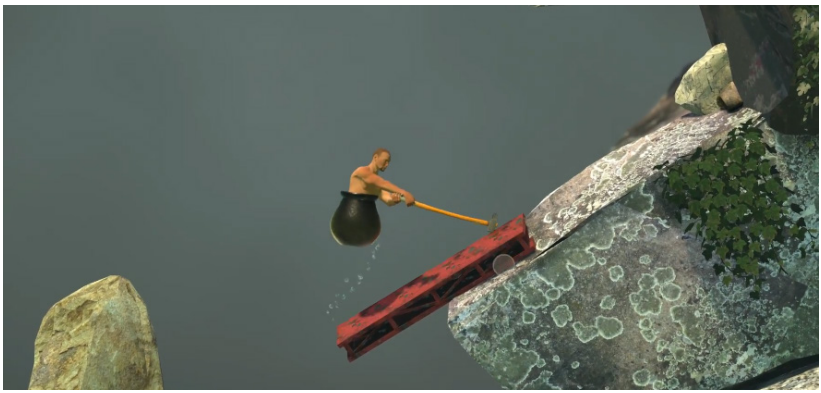

Figure 26. *Screenshot of the video game Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy.* From B. Foddy. (2017).

To understand why these issues matter today, we must consider how cybernetic logics have been carried forward—not only through systems thinking, but through the design of increasingly complex infrastructures that mediate everyday life. Australian scholar Kate Crawford (2021) and American data journalist Meredith Broussard (2023) have shown how contemporary systems often obscure political and material consequences beneath claims of neutrality, while American climatologist Michael E. Mann (2021) and Italian-American economist Mariana Mazzucato (2021) warn of the systemic inertia

obstructing meaningful reform in the face of climate breakdown and economic inequity. Even more centrist voices, such as Danish political scientist Bjørn Lomborg (2020), acknowledge the escalating costs of mismanaged global responses—the cost of inaction is mounting, and even the options we allow ourselves to imagine are shaped by consequences already in motion. Our imagination does not operate in a vacuum—it's constrained by the very systems and trajectories we've inherited, making some futures feel impossible before they're even considered.

Yet recognizing rupture is not enough. How we frame and respond to disruption—through the improvisational, interpretive posture of play—determines whether systems may be reimagined rather than simply restored. Glitch is not only perceived as a technical artifact or aesthetic error, but a call to engage—a moment where interpretive response and the agency of disruption become possible. This agency does not arise from rupture alone, but from the willingness to interpret, respond, and reframe—a learned fluency for navigating instability as a site of possibility.

In the deliberate misbehavior of speedrunning, we see players bending rules not for chaos, but for mastery. In machinima, systems are repurposed for narrative, humor, and critique. In *Glitch'N'Games*, audiences are invited to not only witness failure, but to co-create with it. These are not incidental deviations—they are propositions. Not just enabled by play, but emergent through it. A glitch, on its own, is merely rupture. It is play that renders it legible, expressive, and open to transformation. Play is not a supplement to systems thinking, nor an exception to it—it is the condition that enables interpretive agency within digital systems. Through play, both designers and user-viewer-players begin to recognize glitches not simply as visual artifacts or errors to be corrected, but as openings—ruptures that invite active response, reveal systemic bias, and make space for reimagining how systems and their users are intended to behave.

To play is to resist the inevitability of the intended. It is to turn passive use into active encounter. It is to recognize that even in a world increasingly governed by technical systems, we still have the capacity to misbehave meaningfully.

The glitch does not simply interrupt; it proposes. And play is how we respond.

Play is not something we do after systems are made. It is how we make them otherwise.

To roll the dice is to co-write the game.

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Dawnia Darkstone
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DRUGS_TM
Eddie Lohmeyer
Estelle Flores
Geist
Hellmalware
Jael Whiteney Brothers
Jamie Fenton
James Usill
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